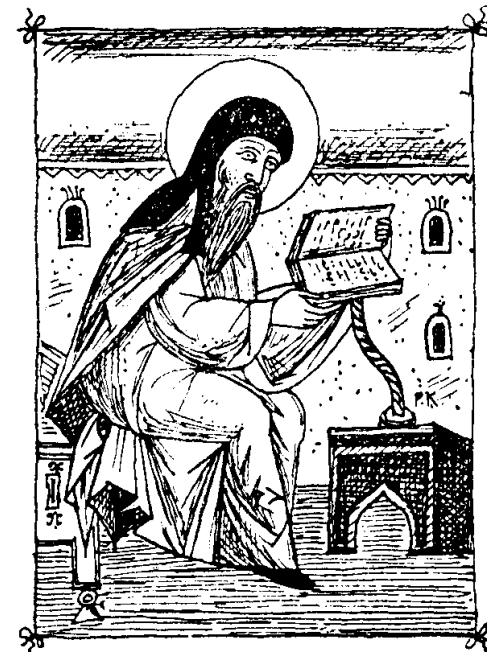


The Church's Most Ascetical Book



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without ceasing” (I Thess. 5:17).

As anyone can see, these biblical passages are directed not towards monks and nuns; they are addressed to all of Christ’s disciples, both to those who are single, and to those who are married and have children, with all the usual cares that go with family life. The early followers of our Saviour understood well that they were in the world, but not of the world. Of their own volition, they took upon themselves this “easy yoke,” and strove to renounce the heavy yoke of the passions. “Be still, and know that I am God.” “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

The ascetical teachings of the New Testament, my beloved, show us how, with the help of God’s grace, we may obtain the stillness and the purity needed to approach the true study of theology, the knowledge of God. Further, the holy season of the Great Fast, with its compunctionate and introspective hymns, enables us to absorb these teachings with greater zeal and to consecrate our lives to this sacred purpose. If we are to live in Christ, we must first die to the passions. This is the primary lesson of the holy Fast; this is the foremost teaching that we glean from the New Testament.

As the sacred hymnology of the Church says:

Let us gladly embrace the Fast, O ye peoples, for the beginning of spiritual struggles hath arrived. Let us leave off the comfort of the flesh, let us increase the gifts of the soul, let us also suffer affliction as servants of Christ, that we may also be glorified together as children of God; and the Holy Spirit Who dwelleth in us shall enlighten our souls.

(Aposticha of Tuesday Matins of Cheese Fare Week)

May we be counted worthy of this, my beloved Orthodox Christians. Amen.

Your fervent suppliant unto God
✠ Ephraim, Bishop of Boston

Great Lent, 1994

The Church’s Most Ascetical Book

— From Metropolitan Ephraim’s Lenten Encyclical of 1994 —

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

My beloved Brethren and Children in Christ,

With the approach of the Great and Holy Fast, these words of Saint Gregory the Theologian come to mind:

Not to everyone, my friends, does it belong to philosophize about God; not to everyone — the subject is not so cheap or low — and, let me add, not before every audience, nor at all times, nor on all points; but on certain occasions, before certain people, and always within limits.

The study of theology is not permitted to all men, but only to those who are masters of meditation, and who have been previously purified in soul and body; or, at the very least, are now being purified. For the impure to touch the pure is unsafe, even as it is harmful to fix the gaze of the eyes upon the sun.

(Theological Orations, I, 3)

With these profound words, Saint Gregory explains how one must approach the things that pertain to God and the revealed Faith. Reverence, self-reproach, and especially purity are required. “The subject is not so cheap or low.” Many tears must flow, many unseemly thoughts must be confessed, many unbecoming habits must be forsaken, many idols (that is, our pride and our personal opinions) must be destroyed, before the grace and truth of God can begin to enter our hearts, before we can begin to study theology.

I will never forget the spiritual advice I heard from a monk on the Holy Mountain in 1963, when I received the monastic tonsure as a rassophor monk. “When a person forsakes the world,” he told me, “his mind is brimming with noise and turmoil. It is like a glass filled with swirling, muddy water. However, if he embraces the monastic

discipline with diligence, the swirl of noise and distraction will begin to settle and disappear like the mud in the water, and the water will slowly clear, and it is only then that the light will begin to be able to penetrate into his heart. It is only then that he will begin to understand the words of the Prophet-king David, ‘Be still, and know that I am God’” (Psalm 45:10).

Yet how can most of us, who are not monastics, and are immersed in the cares and noise of the world, “be still”? Indeed, how can any of us, the impure, approach the Pure One? As Saint Gregory writes, “For the impure to touch the pure is unsafe.” How, then, can we become pure? How can we become theologians —not in the academic sense that the world knows, but in the true sense, in the Church’s understanding of the word “theologian,” that is, one who has seen and known God? This is certainly the purpose of our life as Orthodox Christians.

The season of the Great Fast, with its hymns of spiritual contrition that call us to a change of heart, affords us a special opportunity to reflect on this matter. If we examine this subject carefully, we will find that the path to stillness and purity is outlined in great detail in the Church’s most ascetical book. The book I am referring to is not written specifically for monastics, however. That is to say, I am not alluding to *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by Saint John of Sinai, or the *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, or *The Philokalia*, or *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, or the *Homilies* of Saint Macarius the Great, or any other such book. No, the book I am actually referring to is the New Testament.

What, then, does this most ascetical book teach us? Let us examine a few passages:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are they that mourn... Blessed are the meek... Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness... Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure in heart... Blessed are the peacemakers... Blessed are they that are persecuted... Blessed are ye, when

men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake” (Matt. 5:3-11). “Narrow is the gate, and afflicted is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matt. 7:14). “Be not anxious for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on” (Matt. 6:25). “When ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance” (Matt. 6:16). “Whosoever shall smite thee, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also” (Matt. 5:40). “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that deal spitefully with you and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). “Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5:28). “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth” (Matt. 6:19). “Fear not them which kill the body” (Matt. 10:28). “He that loseth his life for My sake shall find it” (Matt. 10:39). “The Kingdom of the Heavens suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matt. 11:12). “Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment” (Matt. 12:36). “Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: these are the things which defile a man” (Matt. 15:19-20). “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for My sake shall find it” (Matt. 16:24-25). “Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). “If a man strive in contest, yet he is not crowned except he strive lawfully” (II Tim. 2:5). “I subdue my body, and bring it into subjection” (I Cor. 9:27). “In all things approving ourselves as ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in vigils, in fastings, in purity” (II Cor. 6:4-6). “Pray